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If you will it,
Herzl is a neocon
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If you will it, Herzl is a neocon

Conservative thinker Yoram Hazony's take on the 'prophet of the Jewish state' sticks to myths and recycles arguments. His new book is an example of appropriating the past to suit today's political and ideological purposes



The figure of Theodor Herzl, dominating the landscape of the Israeli coastal city named for him.

Tomer Appelbaum

Elitzur Bar-Asher Siegal

In his new book, "A Jewish State: Herzl and the Promise of Nationalism" (Hebrew), conservative philosopher Yoram Hazony sets out to present Theodor Herzl as an important thinker at odds with the author of "The Social Contract," the 18th-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Though Hazony's interpretation is extremely problematic, to put it mildly, it offers an opportunity to reexamine in its light the fascinating figure of Herzl and the use that's made of him for political purposes.

Herzl, who was born in 1860, was a pretty good playwright whose works reflect vividly his private life and the events of that period. For example, his play "The New Ghetto" (1894) gave expression to his growing interest in problems relating to the fate of the Jews in Europe. The characters he created were very familiar to him from the Jewish community of Vienna (where he lived for years) and resemble him and his family. As a playwright who ranged between the personal and the political, Herzl was adept at depicting nuances of human behavior and at characterizing

both the local politics and the geopolitics of the period. However, his truly great drama began when he was in his 30s, when he became a "producer" of Jewish politics and made the world a stage.

In 1897, inspired by French politics and its subtleties, to which he had been exposed as a journalist covering the political scene in Paris, Herzl produced a play about a state-in-the-making whose leaders meet at the First Zionist Congress, in the auditorium of a casino in Basel, Switzerland. With wisdom and

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no little audacity, Herzl worked on the assumption that these political games would take on flesh and bring about the establishment of a state in practice.

Herzl's production skills in his final years fused imagination and an effort to shape reality, stir amazement, even admiration. However, none of this made him an important political thinker. It would be a mistake to say that Herzl was a philosopher, and it's difficult to discern a uniform, systematic doctrine in his writings and his diaries. For the most part, with the exception of his 1896 manifesto "The Jewish State," his letters and his diaries, he put forward ideas through stories and plays in which the characters express positions – in some cases more fully developed, in others less so – by means of dialogues.

In other writings and in his conduct in the political arena, Herzl took a scattershot approach, adopting the right pragmatic approach for the time and the place. For example, it would be difficult to situate him on an imaginary scale at one end of which is Jewish particularism and at the other, broad universality. Even during the last third of his life, when he was immersed in

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Zionist activity, Herzl moved along that scale, from one pole to the other.

Accordingly, from its beginning to the last page, Hazony's new book raises the question of why he wishes to portray Herzl as a conservative, nationalist thinker, when it's obvious to anyone familiar with Herzl's personal and intellectual biography that this description plays havoc with reality. For example, Hazony holds fast to myths that have long since been refuted, and surprisingly recycles the notion that the Dreyfus affair was the seminal event that transformed Herzl's world. In fact, Israeli historian Shlomo Avineri and many others have disproved this on the basis of detailed examination of Herzl's diaries and his writings and articles from the period in question.

However, the primary problem in Hazony's reading lies in his discussion of Herzl's critique of Rousseau's thought. In "The Social Contract," Rousseau, in his argument to justify the state, describes the process of its emergence. It is, he says, a process that occurs from the free will of people, individuals, who together arrive at agreement among themselves – a pact that unites them into one group in the framework of which the leadership is chosen. According to a widely held interpretation, Rousseau did not see in this process a literal episode from the past, but a rhetorical literary device through which to portray the balance of forces in society and to define the relations between citizens and rulers. In other words, he viewed the social contract as a theoretical philosophical model that enabled a normative justification of government.

Herzl rarely delved into substantive philosophical questions. He studied a little philosophy at law school but was not an expert in political philosophy or the history of ideas. Yet, exceptionally, in the final section of "The Jewish State," he chose to take issue with Rousseau's social contract theory and with ideas related to the moral validity and authority of a state's leaders. Like many others, Herzl did not grasp the essence of the theory that underlies the idea of the social contract. He inferred that if Rousseau's depiction of the founding of a state represents the only proper path to its establishment, then the government possesses moral validity only if the people genuinely came together prior to its existence and chose it of their own free will. Herzl's concern was that if this is the only moral justification for the formation of a state, then it is impossible to justify the practical plans proposed in

"The Jewish State," in which the leadership evolves before its formal appointment or election by the people.

The Zionist Congress, according to Herzl's plan, sought to establish a state in practice without having been elected or authorized to do so. Effectively, it was a scheme by which the leadership takes on itself responsibility for the fate of the Jewish people. This theoretical dilemma led Herzl to rely on another type of pact to justify the relations between the government and its subjects. By its means, leaders appoint for themselves a "gestor" – guardian, or custodian – on the assumption that the Jews would accord de facto authorization to this entity, even without having given their explicit consent.

In Herzl's words, "When the property of an oppressed person is in danger, any man may step forward to save it. This man is the gestor, the director

Other than relying on the idea that 'Herzl said so' – Hazony's principal argument for justifying the conservative-nationalist position rests on a 'discourse of victors.'

of affairs not strictly his own. He has received no warrant – that is, no human warrant; higher obligations authorize him to act." And also: "A State is created by a nation's struggle for existence. In any such struggle it is impossible to obtain proper authority in circumstantial fashion beforehand... the gestor will therefore simply take the leadership into his hands and march in the van[guard]."

Herzl is thus proposing to transplant a concept from the realm of private law into the realm of constitutional law. Just as the individual can appoint himself a gestor in order to help a friend in time of trouble, so the gestor comes forward to rescue the members of his nation when they are unable to lead themselves, and in this way enshrines his authority.

Is Herzl revealed here to be an original thinker? He is not. He drew inspiration from a French philosophical approach that was accepted in the place and at the time he drafted his plan for a Jewish state. These ideas were articulated by Leon Bourgeois, who served briefly as prime minister of France, between November 1895 and April 1896. Herzl, effectively, followed in his footsteps both here and in other matters (among them

the economic doctrine of "solidarity" that he proposed in several places).

The clause about which Herzl argues with Rousseau is at the center of Hazony's book. Rousseau maintains that all people are equal as individuals, even before the formation of a nation, whereas Herzl's argument encompasses the concept of the nation from the very outset. In Hazony's simplistic, dichotomous world, it must follow that if Rousseau draws on a universal assumption and Herzl argues with him, presupposing that there is a nation that precedes government – then Herzl must object to liberal-universal ideas. Hazony takes it even a step further: Everyone who believes in Rousseau-style universalism is necessarily also in favor of the imperialistic unification of humanity – a patently flimsy conceptual connection.

These arguments are creaky, since Herzl's disagreement with Rousseau is specific. It relates to the question of the justification of government and to the timing of a legal connection between the nation and its leaders. Herzl's nationalism plays a central role in other contexts, but here the mention of "the nation" is completely unrelated to the particular Jewish historical-national context. It refers, rather, to the question of what precedes what – does the nation choose the leadership, or does the leadership come to save the nation? – as part of a philosophical dialogue that is required to discuss Rousseau's idea of the social contract.

It's precisely in this connection that Herzl's affinity for French thought is important. As Bourgeois put it earlier, the basis of every society is not a "nation" but free individuals: namely, human beings who forge an alliance between themselves of their free will. Rousseau believed that in the transition from the natural condition to the civil condition, a "collective self" is formed whose will is the "general will" and not the sum of all people's wills. In contrast, the theory propounded by Bourgeois and Herzl rests on what is a clear-cut liberal position: Individuals, not the nation or any other collectivity, underlie the state.

This theory dovetails with what Herzl said about the place and the rights of the individual in society and in the state. In other words, he is deeply rooted in clearly liberal thought. His viewpoint is more liberal than Rousseau's and the polar opposite of that of the figure Hazony portrays in his book.

In rare cases, Hazony admits the difficulty of characterizing Herzl as an opponent of liberalism. For example, he is aware that in "Altneuland" (1902), Herzl describes the Arabs in Palestine as equal citizens in the state he describes. Hazony asserts that this book is no more than a "utopian vision" that Herzl did not consider to be serious, whose material-

ization he did not want to see. And this is despite the fact that Herzl declared in the novel, "If you will it, it is no dream," and that the book, as Herzl wrote to himself and others, was not intended to describe the distant future but related to the present, to the here-and-now.

Hazony's reading is functional. It resembles the way many American conservatives interpret the writings of their Founding Fathers, and according to which the U.S. Constitution needs to be read in accordance with the intentions and ideological line of its framers. Hazony attaches supreme moral importance to Herzl's original intention (he's not alone in doing this; both the right and the left appropriate his thought); so that, if Herzl's original intention was far from liberal thought, then Zionism and the State of Israel, too, should distance themselves from liberalism and draw closer to the approach of the "prophet of the state."

Hazony argues that as a society, in Israel, we are now called upon to decide about the question, "Should we cast off the political ideals of our forebears or return to them?" Accordingly, "if we wish to decide wisely, it is incumbent on us to know the story of Binyamin Ze'ev Herzl [his Hebrew name] and his political doctrine that sprang from this story." However, Hazony does not describe for his readers the singular, particularist Jewish tradition that is supposed to serve as Israel's conceptual and moral foundation. According to the author, along with Herzl's doctrine, everything must rest on the sublime ideas of the Bible (which of course are not spelled out in the Bible but are subject to interpretation and exegesis). However, it's not clear who is vested with the right or the authority to decide which chapters and values in the Bible represent Jewish tradition.

The truth is that, other than relying on the idea that "Herzl said so" – that is, other than the commitment to his conservative reading – the principal argument put forward by Hazony for justifying the conservative-nationalist position rests on a "discourse of victors."

Today, nationalist parties on the right are gaining popularity and triumphing in elections in many countries, Britain is leaving the European Union, Donald Trump has propounded the idea of "making America great again" (Hazony's book was published before Joe Biden's victory), and in Israel the Nation-State Law has been enacted. The world has become rightist and reviles the left, and this is the proof that justifies the path of conservatism and the failure of liberalism. Thus, a principled and extremely important debate is based on arguments of a balance of forces and of winners and losers, which join this careless and manipulative reading of Herzl.